The rise of Hitler.

During the First World War Adolf Hitler was a corporal in the German army. When the fighting ended he was lying in hospital recovering from a gas attack. By 1933 Hitler was Chancellor (Prime Minister) of Germany. Winston Churchill described the Germans in 1934 as 'that wonderful, scientific, intelligent, docile, valiant people.

Hitler and many other germans felt that it all had been in vain.

GERMANY 1919-1923.

Germany was in turmoil in the years after the war.

Resentment over the war and the Treaty of Versailles.

By 1918 the Allied naval blockade was working well. The German people were very short of food. Their morale was low, but they still did not know how bad the situation really was. The fighting had not reached Germany when the war ended, so the Kaiser was able to keep the news of all German defeats from the people. Only German victories were announced. As a result, it was a terrible shock to the Germans when General Ludendorff asked for peace and the Kaiser abdicated and fled to Holland.

The Germans had been very proud indeed of their army and navy before the war. They could not believe that they had been defeated. They hated the Treaty of Versailles for cutting their armed forces right down. Most Germans believed that Germany must be great again. Hitler was able to make good use of their resentment.

The threat from Communism.

After the Russian Revolutions of 1917, many Communists believed that world revolutions would follow. Karl Marx had always expected Germany to be the first country to have a Communist revolution. In the chaos in Germany from 1918 to 1919 the Communists did seem to be about to take over. There were Communist revolutions in the naval base at Kiel; in the capital, Berlin; in Munich, where Hitler was living; and in other cities too.

The German government which took over control of Germany when the Kaiser abdicated made a deal with the army. With some volunteer regiments called Feikorps. They crushed the Communists.

The Communists in Berlin were defeated and their two leaders clubbed to death. Nearly 600 people were killed in Munich.

The Communist revolution in Germany failed, but the Communists were still strong, right up until 1933. Many people feared them. Hitler was able to take advantage of this fear to win support for himself, especially from businessmen and from the middle classes.

Suspicion of parliamentary government.

With Berlin in chaos, the new democratic government met in the town of Weimar in 1919. For this reason the government of Germany, until 1933, was called the Weimar Republic. Friedrich Ebert was its first president. His government had to agree to the armistice of 1918 and sign the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Many German patriots blamed the Weimar Republic for what they thought to be these disasters. They began to believe that it was the politicians of the new republic who had asked for peace rather than Ludendorff. The story grew that the politicians had 'stabbed the army in the back'. Hitler called them a 'gang of wretched crimminals.

On the other hand, the Communists also hated them for crushing their revolution.

Before the war most important political decisions had been left to the Kaiser. The German people had never had any real experience of democracy. Many still felt that the army and the upper classes were really the rightful rulers of Germany. Therefore the Weimar Republic always seemed shaky.

There were several political parties in the Reichstag, which was the name given to the Weimar parliament. A party could form an overall majority only by making a coalition with another party. These coalitions usually did not last long and were very easily upset.

Many Germans mistrusted parliamentary democracy, especially when things went wrong. By 1933, they were ready to try a dictatorship.

Economic crisis.

The German economy was in great difficulties after the war. First of all, the war itself had cost Germany a great deal of money. Now unemployment was high and there were few jobs for the soldiers returning from the war. The Treaty of Versailles took away from Germany some important industrial areas, such as the Saar with its rich coalfields. The Versailles Treaty also said that the Germans had to pay reparations to the Allies for the damage and cost of the war.

The British and French had borrowed huge sums of money from the USA during the war. The USA wanted the loans repaid. Britain and France were therefore anxious for Germany to pay up, but the German economy could not stand this. Inflation soon reached incredibly high levels. Paper notes were printed for huge sums, but were worth almost nothing.

The French were angry because Germany could not pay reparations, and in 1923 sent troops into the industrial area of the Ruhr in Germany. They hoped to take goods from the area's factories and mines. The workers there went on strike in protest. As a result, the value of the mark (the German currency) went down until it became worthless.

Once again, many people – rather unfairly – blamed the Weimar government. Middle-class people on fixed wages with some hard-earned savings suffered more from this inflation. Later, many in this class supported Hitler.

The Nazi Party in the early years.

After the war Hitler decided to go into politics. Many new parties were springing up at that time, and in 1919 he went to a meeting in Munich of the German Workers' Party. It had very few members and almost no money. Hitler was surprised to be made Committee Member Number Seven of this small party, without even being asked.

He had intended to set up his own party but decided to join them instead. Soon he was in control of the little group. He changed its name to the *National Socialist* German Workers' Party (NSDAP) or Nazi for short. In 1920, he helped to launch the Nazi Party's twenty-five point programme. It contained a great mixture of ideas. Some of the points were nationalistic – aimed at making Germany great again; some were socialist – to help working people; some were anti-Semitic – against Jews.

Most of the points were borrowed from other parties programmes, but the mixture was made by Hitler.

1. We demand the union of all Germans to form a great Germany.
2. We demand the abolition of the Treaty of Versailles.
3. We demand land for settling our surplus population.
4. None but those of German blood may be a member of Germany; no Jew, therefore, may be a German.
8. We demand that all non-German immigration be stopped.
11. We demand the abolition of incomes unless earned by work.
14. We demand profit sharing in great industries.
15. We demand generous provision for old age.
19. We demand education of gifted children at state expense.
23. We demand that all newspaper owners, editors and journalists should be members of the German nation.

From the Nazi Party's 25-point programme, 1920.

Hitler's own beliefs were much simpler:

1. Race. He believed that the German people belonged to a superior race called the Aryans, and that they were the master-race, the *herrenvolk*.
2. Anti- Versailles. He was against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Germany must be a great country again, re-taking all that it had lost, by war if necessary.
3. Anti-Communist. He was anticommunist because Communism made class conflict more important than national conflict.
4. Anti-Weimar, anti-democratic. He believed in dictatorship, and despised democracy. 'A hundred blockheads do not equal one man of wisdom', he said.

The new Nazi Party soon began to attract attention. This was partly because the programme offered something for everyone, but it was also because of the violence of his supporters. Hitler had set up an armed, uniformed and disciplined force within the Party: the Storm-troopers or SA. They were also called Brownshirts because of the uniforms they wore. They were directed to keep order at Party meetings. Later they broke up the meetings of opponents and stopped them from speaking.

In 1923, Hitler felt he had enough support to try to seize power. At a meeting in a beer hall in Munich, he announced that he was taking over the government. The next morning, together with the war hero General Ludendorff and Nazi supporters, he marched into Munich. However, the police did not join him and he failed to gain enough support. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to five years in Lansberg prison. In fact, he served only nine months. He used the time to write his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) describing his life, his beliefs and what he set out to do. One lesson he had learned from the Beer Hall Putsch, as it was called, was that he should win power legally next time.

THE STRESEMANN YEARS 1923-1930.

While Hitler was in prison, the German government managed to improve the situation in the country. This led to a short period of almost normal life in Germany. As most of Germany's problems were concerned with relations with other countries, the job of Foreign Minister was obviously important. For most of this period, this post was held by Gustav Stresemann, a very able diplomat.

At first, Stresemann was Chancellor, and in 1923 introduced a new currency, the *rentenmark*. This brought inflation under control. French troops left the Ruhr. German industry began to pick up, and unemployment declined.

In 1924 the USA agreed to lend money to Germany so that reparations could be paid again. This was called the Dawes Plan.

In 1925, Stresemann signed the Locarno Pact. Part of the agreement was that France, Belgium and Germany should keep to the borders established in the Versailles Treaty. France agreed never to send troops into Germany again. The effect of the pact was to remove tension between countries. In 1926, Germany joined the League of Nations. This was another sign that Germany was no longer an outcast.

There was a decline in the bitterness and anger which Hitler appealed to in his speeches.

The nazis had little support. The only sign of the deep-rooted German desire for military power was the election of the old First World War Field Marshal, Paul von Hindenburg, as President. Stresemann died in 1929.

Hitler comes to power (1930-1933).

From his low position in 1928, Hitler became Chancellor in 1933.

In October 1929, the USA was plunged into Depression in what became known as the Wall Street Crash.

American loans to Germany under the Dawes Plan stopped, and soon the German economy was in trouble again. Wages fell and unemployment increased until by 1933 one in three Germans was unemployed.

Food prices fell, and small farmers found it difficult to make a living.

In the middle of all this despair and confusion, the Nazis promised full employment and a great Germany again. They also put forward scapegoats for all Germany's problems. They said the Jews and Communists were to blame. This last point particularly appealed to some rich businessmen, who made large gifts to Nazi party funds. The Nazi rallies at election times now made a big show.

Many Germans were now tired of the Weimar government. They blamed it for their defeat in 1918 and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. They remembered the terrible inflation after the war and the humiliating French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. Now the Weimar government seemed unable to deal with unemployment. Like the other democratic countries in Europe, Britain and France, it seemed to be powerless to help the people in this crisis.

Even the Weimar politicians began to show their lack of faith in democracy. The President, Hindenburg, did not believe that the Reichstag could solve the problems which faced Germany. He began to use his power to bypass the Reichstag and rule by presidential decree – a form of dictatorship. The German Chancellors worked with him in this. They often had little support in the Reichstag and were more interested in personal power than in the national interest.

In these circumstances, the 1930 elections showed remarkable results: the leading Weimar parties – the Social Democrats and Centre Parties lost many seats. The Communists went from 64 up 13 seats and the Nazis, down to 12 seats before the election, went up to 107 seats.

In other words, there was a shift to the extremist parties – the Communists and Nazis – both of whom openly planned to overthrow the Weimar democracy.

In 1932, Hitler gained more publicity by standing in the presidential elections. He came a good second to Hindenburg. In the Reichstag elections of that year, the Nazis increased their vote to 37% of the votes cast. They became the biggest single party in the Reichstag.

some of the right-wing parties hoped to get into power by joining with the Nazis.

The Socialists were still a large party, and the Communists were gaining support among the workers in the cities, but they would not co-operate. The Communists thought that the Nazis would cause a revolution which would make the people see the Nazis for what they were and then sweep the Communists into power.

Hitler was not yet ruler of Germany, as he did not have an overall majority in the Rreichstag.

But the Weimar politicians feared that Hitler might try to seize power. So early in 1933, Chancellor Franz von Papen, the leader of a group of right-wing politicians, made an alliance with Hitler. They persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as Chancellor and von Papen as Vice-Chancellor. Von Papen believed that he could use the Nazis' popular support to increase his own power. He believed that it would be easy for him to rule through Hitler and tell him what to do. Hitler wanted to try to win an overall majority for the Nazis. In February 1933 he called for new elections.

Hitler gains power.

The Nazis usually gained votes among the middle classes, small farmers and the young unemployed. They regularly used violence at elections. Now, however, they were in the government, so they could control the police and newspapers. Goering was in charge of two-thirds of the police forces in Germany. In addition, he recruited 50,000 'extras' from the SA. Opponents were beaten up and their meetings wrecked. Nazi meetings received full protection. Then, just before the election, the Reichstag caught fire. A young Communist was arrested and blamed, although it is possible that the Nazis set fire to the building themselves in order to throw suspicion on to the Communists. Amid violence and bullying, the election took place.

The Nazis still did not have an overall majority. Hitler never did win an overall majority at an election. However, the Nazis expelled the Communists and joined with the Nationalists. This gave them the majority.
Hitler had gained control of Germany at last.